



The Challenges of Standards-Based Grading

A well-planned report card can help parents relate standards to their children.

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With their curriculum standards articulated and assessment procedures to measure those standards in place, many elementary educators today are developing standards-based report cards. However, shortly after beginning the process most find themselves embroiled in controversy, particularly when parents see a standards-based report card for the first time. Discussions about the report card turn into heated debates and unexpected problems thwart their progress. Developing a report card that satisfies the diverse needs of parents and the school often seems impossible.

Focusing on standards poses unique challenges in grading and reporting. Let's consider the most pressing challenges and what educators can do to ensure success in implementing a standards-based report card that satisfies parents and the school.

Challenge 1: Clarifying the Purpose

The first challenge to address is clarifying the report card's purpose. Consider these three key questions:

1. What information do we want to communicate?
2. Who is the primary audience for that information?
3. How would we like that information to be used?

Developing a new report card is more a challenge in effective communication than simply documenting or quantifying student achievement.

Many educators make the mistake of choosing their reporting format first, without giving careful attention to the purpose. As a result, both parents and teachers perceive the change as a newfangled fad that presents no real advantage over more traditional reporting methods. The majority of these efforts end up being short-lived experiments that are abandoned after a few troubled years of implementation.

However, efforts that begin by clarifying the purpose make intentions clear from the start. If, for instance, the purpose of the report card is to communicate to parents the achievement status of students, then parents must understand the information in the report card and know how to use it. This means that educators should include parents on the report card committee and carefully consider their input. Once the purpose or function is clear, questions regarding form and method become much easier to address (Guskey and Bailey 2001).

Challenge 2: Differentiating Grading Criteria

The second challenge is differentiating various types of standards-based grading criteria. Teachers typically consider three broad categories of criteria in determining students' grades:

- **Product** relates to students' specific achievements or level of performance based on examinations, final reports, projects, or portfolios, and overall assessments of performance.
- **Process** relates to students' effort, class behavior, or work habits. It also might include evidence from daily work, regular classroom quizzes, homework, class participation, or punctuality of assignments in determining students' grades.
- **Progress** relates to how much students actually gain from their learning experiences. Teachers who use progress criteria typically look at how far students have come rather than where students are (Guskey 1996).

Most teachers base their grading on some combination of criteria, especially when students receive only a single grade in each subject area (Brookhart 1993; Frary, Cross, and Weber 1993). The majority of teachers also vary the criteria they employ from student to student, taking into account individual circumstances (Truog and Friedman 1996). Although teachers do so in an effort to be fair, the result is a “hodgepodge” grade that includes elements of achievement, effort, and improvement (Brookhart 1991; Cizek, Fitzgerald, and Rachor 1996; McMillan, Myran, and Workman 2002). Thus, interpreting the grade or report becomes difficult for parents (Friedman and Frisbie 1995). An “A” grade, for example, may mean that the student knew what the teacher expected before instruction began (product), didn’t learn as well as expected but tried very hard (process), or simply made significant improvement (progress).

A practical solution to this problem is to establish clear indicators of product, process, and progress, and report each separately (Guskey 1994; Stiggins 2001; Wiggins 1996). In other words, teachers separate grades or marks for achievement from those for homework, effort, work habits, or learning progress. Parents generally prefer this approach because it gives them more detailed and prescriptive information. It also simplifies reporting for teachers because they no longer have to combine these diverse types of information into a single grade. The key to success, however, rests in identifying those indicators and the particular criteria to which they relate. Teachers must specifically describe how they plan to evaluate students’ achievement, effort, work habits, and progress, and then communicate these plans directly to students and to parents.

Challenge 3: Moving from Letter Grades to Standards

A third challenge stems from parents who would prefer that elementary educators stick with traditional letter grades rather than reports based on standards. Letter grades make sense to parents because that’s what they received when they were in school. And since most high schools still use letter grades, they want their children to know how to navigate and succeed within that type of grading system.

However, traditional letter grades have two major drawbacks. First, to assign a single letter grade to students for each subject studied, teachers must combine evidence from a multitude of diverse sources into that one mark. As described above, this makes the grade a confusing amalgamation that is impossible to interpret and rarely presents a true picture of a student’s proficiency (Brookhart 1991; Cross and Frary 1996).

A standards-based report card allows teachers to report on the adequacy of students’ academic achievement, as well as their attitudes, efforts, participation, and work habits. It provides parents with a more detailed picture of their child’s academic performance in school, as well as their school-related behaviors.

The second drawback of a single letter grade is that it offers no information about what specifically was learned. Standards-based report cards typically break down each subject area or course into precise elements of learning. Reporting on each of these standards within each subject area gives parents a detailed description of their child’s achievement. A single grade of “C”, on the other hand, communicates little about the student’s specific strengths or particular learning difficulties. Standards-based grading thus facilitates collaborative efforts on the part of parents and educators to help students improve their performance.

Challenge 4: Grading Students with Special Needs

A fourth challenge relates to students with special needs. To fail students with disabilities who have shown tremendous effort and progress clearly seems unfair. But giving passing marks to students who have not met prescribed performance standards also seems wrong.

Assessment procedure adaptations often allow students who receive special education services to meet grade-level standards and need not affect their grades. Students with visual disabilities, for example, may need to take math assessments orally. So long as they respond to the same questions, these students receive full credit with no penalty for the oral format. For students with more severe special needs, however, their individualized education plan (IEP) team may decide to use a modified curriculum that lowers the performance standards. Reporting achievement based on these lower standards likely will be seen as unfair (Bursuck,

Munk, and Olson 1999), unless the reporting system clearly shows the grade is based on different standards. Therefore, special notations must be used in the reporting system. An asterisk, for example, might be added to the grade or mark to indicate that it is based on modified standards. The accompanying footnote might then state, “Based on modified standards.” By law, however, it cannot identify “special education” or “IEP goals.”

Successfully implementing standards-based grading and reporting demands a close working relationship between educators and parents. To accurately interpret the reporting form, parents need to know precisely what the standards mean and what is expected of students. Only when all groups understand what grades or marks mean, and how they can be used to improve student learning, will we realize the true value of a standards-based approach.

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On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions related to this article that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. What are two major drawbacks to using traditional letter grades?
2. What are the benefits of using a standards-based report card?
3. What are the advantages of reporting separate sets of clear indicators—i.e., level of performance (product); effort, behavior, and work habits (process); and how far students have come (progress)—in a standards-based report card?
4. To what extent do we currently describe and communicate the criteria we use to evaluate students' achievement, effort, and progress?
5. Why might we want to create a standards-based report card?
6. What are some of the necessary prerequisite steps we must take to create the context for developing and implementing a standards-based report card that satisfies the needs of parents, students, and teachers?

—Created by [Stephen Gould](#), a consultant and leadership coach with more than 30 years experience as an elementary school principal and assistant superintendent.